



APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE

The Maritime Aquarium at Norwalk and Mystic Aquarium

Testimony Before the Appropriations Committee of the Connecticut General Assembly H.B. No. 6659: AN ACT CONCERNING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM ENDING JUNE THIRTIETH, 2025, AND MAKING APPROPRIATIONS THEREFOR

February 27, 2023

Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony on behalf of The Maritime Aquarium at Norwalk and Mystic Aquarium. First, on behalf of both institutions, we express our sincere appreciation to the Committee, to the General Assembly and to the Governor for the financial support that we each have received in the past; it has been vital to our organizations and the communities which we serve.

The Maritime Aquarium at Norwalk and Mystic Aquarium are the primary economic engines for Connecticut's tourism industry:

- **Combined annual attendance over 1,300,000.**
- **Around 55%, over 700,000 of both Aquariums' visitors, are from out of state.**
- **The out-of-state visitors stay overnight at local hotels; eat at local restaurants, shop in local stores, buy gasoline in Connecticut -- all major contributions to Connecticut state revenue.**
- **More than 1,730 jobs are directly dependent upon both institutions.**
- **Through initiatives such as EBT Programs and a variety of community celebration and awareness days, we provide discounted and free admissions for underserved guests and high-need communities.**
- **We provide STEM education programs to over 150,000 children, including more than 22,000 children from underserved audiences annually.**

We appreciate that the line items for each of our institutions continue to be funded in the Governor's proposed budget. This continued support is critically important to our institutions; however, given the significant financial benefits the Aquariums generate for the State, as listed above, **we respectfully request that this Committee and the General Assembly increase the amounts designated in those line items by an amount equal to retain the appropriated funding over the last two fiscal years, or \$500,000 for each institution.** We strongly believe that by retaining the recent levels of support, we will continue the momentum we have seen in increased visitation, especially among more diversified demographics, and further continue to benefit the State economically.

The Aquariums' Impact:

Education:

- The Aquariums both play a key role in STEM education for Connecticut students through extensive virtual and in-person programming at the Aquarium facilities, classrooms throughout New England, and out in the field.
- We provide essential STEM learning curriculum and activities to every school district in the State.
- The Maritime Aquarium at Norwalk and Mystic Aquarium, working cooperatively, focus particularly on education programs related to Long Island Sound and other ocean environments that bring inquiry-based science learning to over 300,000 young students each year, with particular attention paid to lower income districts, where excellent science instruction is needed more than ever in a state with the largest achievement gap in the nation.

Conservation:

- Both institutions play a critical role in the protection of Long Island Sound and its ecosystem, with a focus on nearshore habitats and coastal communities. The Maritime Aquarium maintains one of the longest-running databases on biodiversity in western Long Island Sound for marine biodiversity and water quality.
- Both Aquariums have permanent exhibits focus exclusively on Long Island Sound and thereby educate the public about the importance of protecting the Sound and the local environment.
- Mystic Aquarium was instrumental in the science behind the establishment of Marine Protected Areas off the coast of New England and the establishment of the Connecticut National Estuarine Research Reserve to protect a large area of Long Island Sound.
- The Maritime Aquarium is leading a major collaboration among the fishing industry, conservation organizations, academic institutions, and state and federal agencies to

remove abandoned and derelict lobster traps that are having a negative impact on the benthic habitat and wildlife of Long Island Sound.

- Both Aquariums are involved with many local, national and international efforts to protect and sustainably manage the ocean, such as developing sustainable fisheries worldwide, and addressing the impacts of climate change locally and globally.
- We organize cleanups that remove more than 1,000 lbs. of trash from local watershed areas.
- Both aquariums participate in many dozens of citizen science and community science projects, which create opportunities for tens of thousands of participants of all ages to learn about conservation and take part in conservation efforts.

Animal Rescue and Research:

- Mystic Aquarium is involved in rescuing and rehabilitating marine mammals and sea turtles, leading this effort not only in Long Island Sound but throughout New England.
- At Mystic Aquarium, a major research laboratory studies the health of marine mammals and is involved in exploring the correlation between marine animal health and human health issues.
- Mystic Aquarium is conducting several studies on the effects of offshore wind energy on marine animals and the environment.

Exhibits and facilities in Aquariums are complex. Maintaining living creatures under water requires expertise in life support systems and continuous operation of pumps, filtration systems, and other complex entities. The care of animals, including endangered or threatened species, must always be of primary concern. Both institutions remain fiscally responsible to ensure we provide exceptional care for our animals and operate safely for guests who visit.

Historically, we have served as good financial stewards of state funding, consistently leveraging our annual support by insuring a positive return on the state's investment to Connecticut and its municipalities. We submit that the return on the State's investment is at least 92 times this amount to the State of Connecticut in direct economic impact, and it will continue to pay dividends in demonstrated improvement in the academic performance of Connecticut's school children. Both institutions are committed to using state funds to drive economic development, for advertising and marketing aimed at attracting tourism, and for support of educational programs benefiting nearly every child in Connecticut. Again, we thank you for your past support, and we appreciate your attention and your consideration of this request.

Thank you for the opportunity to present tonight.